DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 393 096 CS 215 231

AUTHOR Van Every, David A.
TITLE Situating Reading and Writing Abilities.
PUB DATE 24 Mar 95
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-26, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *College Freshmen; *Diaries; Educational Improvement; Higher Education; Opinions; Performance Factors; *Reading Ability; *Student Attitudes; Student Motivation; *Writing Ability; *Writing Assignments
IDENTIFIERS *Personal Writing; Writing Contexts

ABSTRACT

A study examined the belief that to improve education, more must be learned not only about the abilities students bring into the classroom, but also about what the students do outside the classroom. Six freshmen were instructed to keep diaries detailing their views of college life. Each subject was given a blank diary entry on a diskette and instructions for making entries and sending them in by electronic mail and was required to write three or four entries per week for the duration of the semester. The diary instructions were designed around two questions: "How do students view their college experience?" and "What factors affect their academic motivation and performance?" The instructions directed students to write about significant daily experiences and to include opinions, observations, and nonacademic matters such as recreation and social life. By semester's end, over 200 diary entries were collected. Extensive illustrations from two students' diaries serve as examples of the entries. One student was an engineering student from Thailand and the second student was a science major who lived at home and commuted to campus by bus. The male Thai student worried about his slow reading speed, contrasted Thai and American teaching styles, and reported problems with concentrating. The female engineering student's concerns centered on her struggle managing time and adjusting to an unfamiliar style of teaching. Findings suggest that many variables need to be taken into account when evaluating students' performance and motivation. (CR)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 393 096

Situating Reading and Writing Abilities

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
D Van Every
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

David A. Van Every
Center for Innovation in Learning
Carnegie Mellon University

This is a transcript of the presentation I delivered at the Conference for College Composition and Communication, March 24, 1995, Washington, D.C. The presentation is approximately sixteen minutes long. I delivered an abbreviated version of it under the title "Student Experience, Student Motivation: Situating Reading and Writing Abilities" at the conference for American Educational Researchers Association, April 22, 1995, San Francisco, CA.

CS215231

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Copyright: David A. Van Every, 1995

My study, which is entitled "Situating Reading and Writing Abilities" is an exploration of the social space in which our classrooms are situated, to which I will refer to generally as "college life."[2] This study is based on the belief that to improve education we must not only learn more about the abilities students bring into the classroom but also more about what students do outside the classroom. We all know that what takes place outside the classroom is often critical to a student's motivation and performance. We also know that students often work under less than ideal conditions and that different students work with different constraints. My study attempts to acknowledge the reality that college life includes not only an academic dimension but social and human dimensions as well-that students must not only negotiate the demands of academics, demands that often compete or conflict, but they must also negotiate these demands within the constraints imposed on them by their needs and limits as social and human beings. This is the focus of my study, and I explored this space by having students keep diaries, detailing for me their view of college life. I wanted to see it "through their eyes."

I worked with a small group of freshman-twelve originally; but mainly with the six who completed the study. I gave each student a blank diary entry on a diskette and instructions for making entries and sending them to me by email. I required each student to write three to four entries per week for the duration of the semester.

I designed the diary instructions around two questions: "How do students view their college experience?" and "What factors affect their academic motivation and performance?" The diary instructions asked students to write about significant daily experiences and to include opinions, observations, and nonacademic matters such as recreation and social life.

By the end of the semester I had collected over 200 diary entries. As you can well imagine, the entries turned out to be quite rich. In fact, they lend themselves to many types of analyses. However, their analysis for factors affecting motivation is still in progress; therefore, today I will provide just a sampling of excerpts taken from the diaries of two students—one an international student, the other a commuter. These two populations—international students and commuters—deal with special sets of difficulties that are likely to affect motivation. I have chosen excerpts that highlight some of these difficulties; however, as I said before, the excerpts are rich and suggest many factors worth noticing.

* * *

The first student, who I will call "Peter," is a engineering student from Thailand. This first diary excerpt gives us a sense of his character. Notice his concern with time. We will understand the reasons for this concern better as we read the subsequent entries.

> . . . How important time is, I thought during class. For example, time is precious for one of my friends. He sacrifices almost all of his time to studying and he is also adroit as well as diligent. His achievement in academics always motivates me everytime I become lazy; What am I doing right now? Is it useful? He usually practises every problem that he has and he attempts to study by himself first. If he has some questions, he will find someone to help him. He is the best example for me. I admit that most of the students here also study really hard. I hope that they might motivate me to catch up with the works. . . .

In this next entry, Peter contrasts Thai and US teaching styles.

> . . . The teaching styles of teachers here, are substantially different from the teaching styles of the teachers of my country, Thailand. In my country, teachers always tell me everything I need to know. Therefore, students are not required to know how formulas or whatever are derived . . . I just have to remember them. Consequently, I admit that I always absorb the new ideas quite slowly because I am used to just memorizing things.

> When I study here, I have to think about everything. I am fascinated with what I have learned here. For example, in economics, I learned how to maximize my utility and why most people buy cheaper goods instead of buying the goods that they like the most.

In the following entries, Peter describes some of his academic struggles. In the entry below, notice that his study practices seem geared to the Thai style of teaching.

> . . . Why can't I get rid of this habit of making silly mistakes. I try to relax during the test and I try not to let myself get excited. I also realize that four or five days after the test , I start to forget a little bit about what I had learned for the previous test. . . . I sometimes forget the old material after having learned the new topics. As the phrase goes, " The more you learn, the more you forget." I know that my brain can only remember a certain amount of information. . . . Forgetting old material occasionally causes me some problems. Since my courses are on a more advanced level I should have a good understanding of the material covered in my old classes in order to be able to solve the problems in my new class. I usually have to go over the material from my old classes over an over again. It is very time consuming. . . . For me, learning is the process of trying to absorb things in your mind. It always is a slow process. I would like to be able to study every thing at the same time, but I can not do that. If I start to learn something quickly, I might get lost and forget the thing quickly as well. It is really amazing that some people can learn everything at the same time and they comprehend those things well. I don't think that I have that talent. . . .

What may not be apparent with the first reading of this passage is that when Peter refers to his "old classes," he is referring to classes in Thailand. Essentially, Peter is reviewing and re-reviewing his class notes from high school, which he hopes will help him with his college coursework—a practice that must indeed be, in his words, "very time consuming."

In this next entry, Peter describes some of his apprehensions and struggles related to reading English. Notice his concern for his slow reading speed and the trouble he had reading U.S. History.

> . . . The thickness of the textbooks scared me when I bought the books I needed for my classes. I got quite concerned that I would not be able to finish those books, because of my reading speed. Sometimes I do not want to open them and read them at all. Last year, I spent a great amount of time with my U.S. history book, which I had to read everyday. I fell asleep many times, while I was reading it. I did not want to spend so much time just reading my history book. . . . For me, science books are quite easy to read and I do not have to spend a lot of time on them.

Finally, in this last excerpt Peter describes some of the problems he had periodically with concentrating.

> Sometime during the day, I can not concentrate on my work for some reason. It is really terrible that I can not concentrate on the things that I am doing. Plenty of things keep flowing through my mind and it prevents me from doing anything. I can not stand this, when it happens. It is kind of like losing consciousness. . . . I still wonder why my mind works the way it does. Why do I have to think about certain things? How can I get rid of those thoughts?

* * *

The second student, a science major who I will call "Linda," lives at home and commutes to CMU by bus. Notice that Linda too seems to be struggling with managing time and adjusting to an unfamiliar style of teaching.

> I just feel so tired and worn out that it's driving me nuts. I have way too much work and not enough time to do it in. I'll plan to do work for 3 classes, but oly have enought time for 1 or 2, and then I fall behind and just have more work to do the next night. Excuse me while I quietly go mad.

> I still feel very strange being here instead of in high school. There it was sort-of-learn-for-test... no problems. here it's LEARN IT DAMMIT OR FAIL. Which is refreshing but frustrating because I don't really know how to learn, or how to study. I suppose it'll come to me eventually, but right now it's drving me to distraction.

These next three excerpts touch more directly on the issues involved in commuting. Notice the reoccurring theme of isolation. Notice also the logistics involved in Linda pursuing good grades.

> I don't understand the mentality that lets people who are failing stay up all night, skip class, and not do their homework. I'm sitting here struggling to bring up C's, and half my friends are ignoring the R's and D's on their midterm grade reports. Maybe it's that I'm living off campus and don't have the same distractions.

Her next entry . . .

> I didn't really see any of my friends today, except in passing. Just a "hi" on the way to class. This happens every so often. You just get worn down and can't talk to people--it takes too much out of you . . . but it would be nice to see friends, be able to talk to people. The trouble is that so many of those I know are SO depressed right now that I don't know if it is worth it. It'll probably just depress me.

Some entries later . . .

> Despite spending a lot of time just goofing off, especially yesterday (Saturday), I did get a bunch of work done, and i had time to study, which was good. I usually get very sidetracked by fussing about what my friends are doing, but this weekend I knew what many of them were doing, so I could say, "OK. I was with so-and-so, and this person was doing this, and I'm not feeling isolated from human contact, so I can do my homework."

The following entry . . .

> Being a commuter is a hassle. It wouldn't be bad, if I could drive. But since I can't, I have bus troubles. Getting stuck in traffic because the bus has to go a specific route, waiting out in the rain when the dratted thing is late--it's no fun. Besides this, it makes it hard for me to go to meetings, study sessions, or stay late and do work with friends. But I think there are advantages: I'm not staying up until 3 am goofing off on weeknights. I'm not involved in the intense roomate-wars going on with many of my friends. I know how much work I have to do to get which grades, and I'm not distracted while trying to do it.

Two entries later . . .

> I've just gone apathetic. i don't care if I do well on the physics exam tomorrow. That's not true, I do care, I just don't seem to think it's worth it. . . . I'm going to the physics course center tonight to try and get some help. . . . I hate the bus. I really hate the bus. . . .

Some entries later . . .

> The [physics] course center was pretty helpful. I should have started going there earlier. I'm going to really pester my parents next week, trying to get them to let me go there as often as possible. . . .

Her next entry . . .

> My parents are in a bad mood, this put me in a bad mood for most of today, but Jen cheered me up. She's a really great person to have as a friend.

Finally, in Linda's last entry she writes . . .

> I am very tired. I have been in a somewhat foul mood all day, for no good reason. I went to sleep a bit earlier than usual last night, and I'm exhausted. So I've been withdrawn today; shawn wants to know what is wrong. But it's nothing, really. Except--well, commuting is drving me nuts. I think part of the reason I spent all of Wednesday night goofing off instead of working is that commuting is lonely. At times, very lonely. There's no one

around, all your friends are together, doing things, and you're just...alone. And sometimes it just hits you very hard.

* * *

Let me conclude by saying that in lieu of an in-depth analysis of these diaries, even the brief perusal I have presented today is enough to make us aware that students' lives are quite complicated and to alert us to the fact that there are many variables we need to take in to account when evaluating a student's performance and motivation.

[±] The time allotted for this paper's public presentation did not permit me to acknowledge my debt to Alexander Astin (principally his *What Matters in College: Four Critical Year Revisited* (1993) and *The College Environment* (1968)) and to Jenni Nelson (principally her "This Was an Easy Assignment: Examining how students interpret academic writing tasks," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 24, 362-396, (1990)). Therefore, I would like to take this opportunity to remedy that omission: their projects, although different from mine in a number of ways, have been and still are for me sources of inspiration and ideas.